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A MEMORANDUM AT A VENTURE.

"All is proper to be expressed, provided our aim is only high enough."
—*J. F. Millet.*

SHALL the mention of such topics as I have briefly but plainly and resolutely broached in the "Children of Adam" section of "Leaves of Grass" be admitted in poetry and literature? Ought not the innovation to be put down by opinion and criticism? and, if those fail, by the district attorney? True, I could not construct a poem which declaredly took, as never before, the complete human identity, physical, moral, emotional, and intellectual (giving precedence and compass in a certain sense to the first), nor fulfill that *bona fide* candor and entirety of treatment which was a part of my purpose, without comprehending this section also. But I would intrench myself more deeply and widely than that. And while I do not ask any man to indorse my theory, I confess myself anxious that what I sought to write and express, and the ground I built on, shall be at least partially understood from its own platform. The best way seems to me to confront the question with entire frankness.

There are, generally speaking, two points of view, two conditions of the world's attitude toward these matters: the first, the conventional one of good folks and good print everywhere, repressing any direct statement of them, and making allusions only at second or third hand (as the Greeks did of death, which, in Hellenic social culture, was not mentioned point blank, but by euphemisms). In the civilization of to-day, this condition—without stopping to elaborate the arguments and facts, which are many and varied and perplexing—has led to states of ignorance, repressal, and covered-over disease and depletion, forming certainly a main factor in the world's woe. A non-scientific, non-aesthetic, and eminently non-religious condition,

bequeathed to us from the past (its origins diverse, one of them the far-back lessons of benevolent and wise men to restrain the prevalent coarseness and animality of the tribal ages, with Puritanism, or perhaps Protestantism itself for another, and still another specified in the latter part of this memorandum), to it is probably due most of the ill births, inefficient maturity, snickering pruriency, and of that human pathologic evil and morbidity which is, in my opinion, the keel and reason-why of every evil and morbidity. Its scent, as of something sneaking, furtive, mephitic, seems to lingeringly pervade all modern literature, conversation, and manners.

The second point of view, and by far the largest—as the world in working-day dress vastly exceeds the world in parlor toilette—is the one of common life, from the oldest times down, and especially in England (see the earlier chapters of “Taine’s English Literature,” and see Shakespeare almost anywhere), and which our age to-day inherits from riant stock, in the wit, or what passes for wit, of masculine circles, and in erotic stories and talk, to excite, express, and dwell on, that merely sensual voluptuousness which, according to Victor Hugo, is the most universal trait of all ages, all lands. This second condition, however bad, is at any rate like a disease which comes to the surface, and therefore less dangerous than a concealed one.

The time seems to me to have arrived, and America to be the place, for a new departure—a third point of view. The same freedom and faith and earnestness which, after centuries of denial, struggle, repression, and martyrdom, the present day brings to the treatment of polities and religion, must work out a plan and standard on this subject, not so much for what is called society, as for thoughtfulest men and women, and thoughtfulest literature. The same spirit that marks the physiological author and demonstrator on these topics in his important field I have thought necessary to be exemplified, for once, in another certainly not less important field.

In the present memorandum I only venture to indicate that plan and view—decided upon more than twenty years ago for my own literary action, and formulated tangibly in my printed poems (as Bacon says an abstract thought or theory is of no moment unless it leads to a deed or work done, exemplifying it in the concrete)—that the sexual passion in itself, while normal and unperverted, is inherently legitimate, creditable, not neces-

sarily an improper theme for poet, as confessedly not for scientist—that, with reference to the whole construction, organism, and intentions of “Leaves of Grass,” anything short of confronting that theme, and making myself clear upon it, as the inclosing basis of everything (as the sanity of everything was to be the atmosphere of the poems), I should beg the question in its most momentous aspect, and the superstructure that followed, pretentious as it might assume to be, would all rest on a poor foundation, or no foundation at all. In short, as the assumption of the sanity of birth, Nature, and humanity is the key to any true theory of life and the universe—at any rate, the only theory out of which I wrote—it is, and must inevitably be, the only key to “Leaves of Grass,” and every part of it.

That (and not a vain consistency or weak pride, as a late “Springfield Republican” charges) is the reason that I have stood out for these particular verses uncompromisingly for over twenty years, and maintain them to this day. That is what I felt in my inmost brain and heart when I only answered Emerson’s vehement arguments with silence, under the old elms of Boston Common.

Indeed, might not every physiologist and every good physician pray for the redeeming of this subject from its hitherto relegation to the tongues and pens of blackguards, and boldly putting it for oncee at least, if no more, in the demesne of poetry and sanity—as something not in itself gross or impure, but entirely consistent with highest manhood and womanhood, and indispensable to both? Might not only every wife and every mother—not only every babe that comes into the world, if that were possible—not only all marriage, the foundation and *sine qua non* of the civilized state—bless and thank the showing, or taking for granted, that motherhood, fatherhood, sexuality, and all that belongs to them, can be asserted, where it comes to question, openly, joyously, proudly, “without shame or the need of shame,” from the highest artistic and sociologic considerations—but, with reverence be it written, on such attempt to justify the base and start of the whole divine scheme in humanity, might not the Creative Power itself deign a smile of approval?

To the movement for the eligibility and entrance of women amid new spheres of business, polities, and the suffrage, the current, prurient, conventional treatment of sex is the main formidable obstacle. The rising tide of “woman’s rights,” swelling, and

every year advancing farther and farther, recoils from it with dismay. There will in my opinion be no general progress in such eligibility till a sensible, philosophic, democratic method is substituted.

The whole question — which strikes far, very far, deeper than most people have supposed (and doubtless, too, something is to be said on all sides), is peculiarly an important one in art—is first an ethic, and then still more an aesthetic, one. I condense from a paper read not long since at Cheltenham, England, before the “Social Science Congress,” to the Art Department, by P. H. Rathbone, of Liverpool, on the “Undraped Figure in Art,” and the discussion that followed :

“ ‘When coward Europe suffered the unclean Turk to soil the sacred shores of Greece by his polluting presence, civilization and morality received a blow from which they have never entirely recovered, and the trail of the serpent has been over European art and European society ever since. The Turk regarded and regards women as animals without soul, toys to be played with or broken at pleasure, and to be hidden, partly from shame, but chiefly for the purpose of stimulating exhausted passion. Such is the unholy origin of the objection to the nude as a fit subject for art; it is purely Asiatic, and though not introduced for the first time in the fifteenth century, is yet to be traced to the source of all impurity—the East. Although the source of the prejudice is thoroughly unhealthy and impure, yet it is now shared by many pure-minded and honest, if somewhat uneducated, people. But I am prepared to maintain that it is necessary for the future of English art and of English morality that the right of the nude to a place in our galleries should be boldly asserted; it must, however, be the nude as represented by thoroughly trained artists, and with a pure and noble ethic purpose. The human form, male and female, is the type and standard of all beauty of form and proportion, and it is necessary to be thoroughly familiar with it in order safely to judge of all beauty which consists of form and proportion. To women it is most necessary that they should become thoroughly imbued with the knowledge of the ideal female form, in order that they should recognize the perfection of it at once, and without effort, and so far as possible avoid deviations from the ideal. Had this been the case in times past, we should not have had to deplore the distortions effected by tight lacing, which destroyed the figure and ruined the health of so many of the last generation. Nor should we have had the scandalous dresses alike of society and the stage. The extreme development of the low dresses which obtained some years ago, when the stays crushed up the breasts into suggestive prominence, would surely have been checked had the eye of the public been properly educated by familiarity with the exquisite beauty of line of a well-shaped bust. I might show how thorough acquaintance with the ideal nude foot would probably have much modified the foot-torturing boots and high heels, which wring the foot out of all beauty of line, and throw the body forward into an awkward and ungainly attitude.

"It is argued that the effect of nude representation of women upon young men is unwholesome, but it would not be so if such works were admitted without question into our galleries, and became thoroughly familiar to them. On the contrary, it would do much to clear away from healthy-hearted lads one of their sorest trials—that prurient curiosity which is bred of prudish concealment. Where there is mystery there is the suggestion of evil, and to go to a theater, where you have only to look at the stalls to see one-half of the female form, and to the stage to see the other half undraped, is far more pregnant with evil imaginings than the least objectionable of totally undraped figures. In French art there have been questionable nude figures exhibited; but the fault was not that they were nude, but that they were the portraits of ugly, immodest women."

Some discussion followed. There was a general concurrence in the principle contended for by the reader of the paper. Sir Walter Stirling maintained that the perfect male figure, rather than the female, was the model of beauty. After a few remarks from Rev. Mr. Roberts and Colonel Oldfield, the Chairman regretted that no opponent of nude figures had taken part in the discussion. He agreed with Sir Walter Stirling as to the male figure being the most perfect model of proportion. He joined in defending the exhibition of nude figures, but thought considerable supervision should be exercised over such exhibitions."

No, it is not the picture or nude statue or text, with clear aim, that is indecent; it is the beholder's own thought, inference, distorted construction. True modesty is one of the most precious of attributes, even virtues, but in nothing is there more pretense, more falsity, than the needless assumption of it. Through precept and consciousness, man has long enough realized how bad he is. I would not so much disturb or demolish that conviction, only to resume and keep unerringly with it the spinal meaning of the Scriptural text, God overlooked all that He had made (including the apex of the whole,—humanity,—with its elements, passions, appetites), and pronounced it *very good*.

Does not anything short of that third point of view, when you come to think of it profoundly and with amplitude, impugn Creation from the outset? In fact, however overlaid or unaware of itself, does not the conviction involved in it perennially exist at the center of all society, and of the sexes, and of marriage? Is it not really an intuition of the human race? For, old as the world is, and beyond statement as are the countless and splendid results of its culture and evolution, perhaps the best and earliest and purest intuitions of the human race have yet to be developed.

WALT WHITMAN.